

From Black Slaves to *Black Star*:

Towards a Liberating Theology in the Music of Mos Def and Talib Kweli

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Religion Thesis

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April 16th, 2012

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Abstract

This thesis project examines the ways in which hip-hop music engages in a theological remixing of the spirituals towards a means of liberation in 21st century America. To do so, it will look specifically at the lyrics of one particular group: Black Star. Through a lyrical analysis of selected Black Star songs, placed in direct dialogue with those of the slave spirituals, the work shows two distinctly different theological approaches to the discovery of a liberating space for blackness in America. Specifically, this thesis project investigates how hip-hop has carved a theology to meet the changing needs of blacks in America today.

The work has much larger implications as it applies to race relations in America. Hip-hop – specifically the music of Black Star – empowers blacks to formulate a positive sense of self and engages in nation-building, through the metaphor of the ghetto. Black Star speaks to the work of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison in their interrogation of whiteness in America and the normative white gaze's impact on blackness in the 21st century. Putting Black Star's lyrics in discourse with the spirituals, James Cone's black liberation theology and James Baldwin's conceptions of race in America engages the music on the intellectual level that Talib Kweli and Mos Def embody in their lyricism. This work fills a void in the theological discourse on hip-hop by providing a complex synthesis focusing more on the theological, rather than the socio-political, forces hip-hop artists are faced with and how they choose to navigate them.

Introduction

“Microphone Check: One, Two, What Is This?”

- Phife Dawg (of A Tribe Called Quest)

This thesis examines hip-hop’s move away from the theology of the spirituals, specifically through the musical lens of Black Star. To be clear from the outset, I do not intend to pit the spirituals and hip-hop against each other, but to show the shift as the product of a fluid black American culture, as artists found new, empowering ways to cope with America’s failure to reconcile its history of racial injustice. An analysis of the lyrics of Black Star’s songs, when juxtaposed against those of the slave spirituals, will shed light on the changing theological needs of blacks in America in the time of slavery and at the turn of the twenty-first century. While, specifically, this essay seeks to illuminate the complex theology behind the music of Black Star, more generally, I will show the theological links and differences between the lyrical themes of the spirituals and of hip-hop. This work will not serve as a mere defense of hip-hop as “conscious” or political. I aim to use Black Star’s music as an example of how the musical form can liberate blacks from their present conditions in the same way the spirituals were able to empower slaves to persevere while suffering the worst of mankind’s ills at the hands of whites.

While many slaves were able to orient themselves towards God because of their belief in God’s promise of “a land flowing with milk and honey”¹, blacks who found freedom in America came to realize it couldn’t serve as a promised land to them, given the ugly racial history. The economic and social climate for blacks in America pushed

¹ Exodus (3:8)

many into the heart of America's inner cities, where they faced new challenges to their achieving freedom. They were a people that felt the full weight of climbing uphill, being left to fend for themselves in a "market economy that had made them- literally, in the slave days- a commodity."² Despite being emancipated, they were a people who faced the same conceptions of race that forced them into chains in the first place. Faced with these harsh realities, members of the inner-city had to adapt their theology away from the "land flowing with milk and honey" and towards the difficult realities faced and overcome by Joseph, as told in the book of Genesis. In this way liberation theology is just as fluid as culture, constantly shifting and re-shifting to maintain the strength of the believer. As hip-hop began to take hold as a cultural force in America's inner cities, the Joseph story vaulted to the forefront of black liberation theology.

Hip-hop emerged as culturally important for black liberation because of the shift in its theological focus the center of the liberation theology created by the singers of the spirituals. Hip-hop artists like Black Star embody the Joseph story, having shifted their focus from Exodus. These two biblical narratives will be held in opposition to each other. Both will be given a fuller account later on within these pages, but the manner in which they will be used to oppose each other can be set forth to help introduce the standpoint of this project. The Exodus narrative is one that requires the believer to engage in a physical traveling in order to achieve liberation. It is geographically based in the idea that there is a Canaan, or Promised Land beyond the current Egypt, or the land in which suffering takes place. Movement is required; the believer must uproot him or herself from his or her current geographical location to find salvation elsewhere.

² Leeming, David Adams. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Pg. 362.

However, the Joseph story is geographically centered in one location, where suffering and liberation can take place. No physical travel is required of the believer. He or she transcends suffering not by a shift in location, but by a shift in his or her world view.

Egypt and Canaan are not geographically distinct; Egypt *is* Canaan.

This work addresses a void in scholarly work on hip-hop on more than one level. While hip-hop as a subject of academic scrutiny has gained momentum with the work of Michael Eric Dyson, Mark Anthony Neal, James Peterson, Cornel West and others, most of the studies of the cultural impact of the musical form have focused on a particular moment in its history, namely the mid-nineties. It's understandable why the focus so often becomes fixed on that particular moment in time, which is widely considered hip-hop's heyday. The fiery East Coast versus West Coast feud was at its peak then, with N.W.A and Tupac bringing large scale social and political critique to popular music. Notorious B.I.G., Common and Nas, who are widely considered some of hip-hop's greats, released classic the classic albums, *Ready to Die*, *Ressurrection*, and *Illmatic*, respectively, which are said to be three of the great albums the genre has and will ever see. Many of the aforementioned authors do not give the music of today the same academic dissection as that of the heyday, since hip-hop today is widely considered to have sold out its commitment to the message for the money. While it may be true what James Peterson told Duke students attending his lecture, taught alongside Mark Anthony Neal and accomplished hip-hop producer, 9th Wonder, that "high end concepts [are] very, very difficult for this particular hip-hop audience. It just, it doesn't really sell. This is a

Drake hip-hop audience,”³ there referring to a current artist who’s lyrical themes center more around financial success than black cultural uplift. Despite the current hip-hop audiences propensity to consume more of the former than the latter, there still exists an undercurrent in hip-hop of artists who have remained committed to carrying on the cultural heritage of the spirituals and blues in their music. Black Star is on the forefront of this underground movement in hip-hop of groups that may not enjoy the same commercial success as other, more popular artists, but carry a theological message of black liberation in their music and lyrics that cannot be ignored in today’s scholarly theological landscape. Deemed the “Itunes”, or “Ringtone” rap age, the music that followed hip-hop’s heyday has been left largely unexamined by theologians. Black Star is a living testament to the fact that some of these contemporary hip-hop artists avoid the pitfalls of the industry to choose the importance of their lyrical message and emceeing ability over the money, which makes their music ripe for the type of analysis that I aim to conduct with this work.

Ralph Basui Watkins serves as the most prominent guide for the concept of my project, as he was the first (and one of the few if not the only) theologian to note the relevancy of the Joseph story to the black narrative in hip hop. In analyzing the music of Black Star to illumine this theology, while using James Cone’s use of the spirituals in his Black Liberation Theology to show how hip-hop’s theology shifted and from where, I am carving new theological and musicological ground. There hasn’t been much published work on hip hop in the discipline of theomusicology, which makes my interpretation of Black Star’s music relevant in today’s academic landscape surrounding hip-hop.

³ Patterson, James, Mark Anthony Neal, and 9th Wonder. "Sampling Soul." Duke University, Durham, NC. 11 Mar. 2010. Lecture.

Black Star is a duo comprised of two Brooklyn emcees, Mos Def and Talib Kweli. Although they only released one album together, the underground 1998 classic, *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*, it launched them to the forefront of underground hip hop's consciousness. Through their musical body of work, the two artists are an example of black liberation theology in constant dialogue with black cultural expression. Stylistically, the partnership works immaculately, as they seem to play to each other's strengths on the mic. Mos Def's smooth tongue and artful delivery is uniquely his and his alone. He uses that silky flow to compliment his powerful imagery and black cultural subject matter. Talib Kweli, can paint beautiful and detailed pictures with rhyme, all while delivering poignant social critique of the state of the ghetto, black culture and the hip hop culture situated within.

Music is a major means through African Americans have been able to maintain their 'somebodiness' when every outside indication supported their subhuman status. The nature of racism has undergone major transformations over the course of American history, from overt to covert, from in the foreground to behind the scenes, Jim Crow to Jim Crow Jr., but many of the racial attitudes that served to reinforce slavery still exist today. I will explore in my last chapter, with the theoretical help of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, the fact that few, if any at all, attempts have been made to deconstruct whiteness, which allows for the socio-political constructions of race to persist. In the face of the monolithic oppressive American construction of whiteness, music was and still is an important form of black cultural preservation. It was through song that a great number of black slaves found the strength to keep "from sinkin' down"⁴ and that strength

⁴ (Author Unknown). *Keep Me From Sinkin' Down*. Cone, pg. 57.

is characterized in the music of Black Star, though in a new framework. The theology behind Black Star's lyrics takes up the task of the spirituals, but with the Joseph story as a guide to help create a way out of no way and to transcend the institutional realities of the American ghetto by re-imagining the space as a center of black cultural preservation and liberation.

To close out my discussion of the ghetto: hip-hop's both physical and imagined haven, I will bring Baldwin's and Morrison's methods of wresting power from monolithic whiteness in America into the fold. The Joseph metaphor of re-imagining space extends into the creation and maintenance of language hierarchies. Whiteness has historically defined blackness because of white dominance in America. Both Baldwin and Morrison have spoken eloquently about this very subject of normativity and the subsequent fact that whites have therefore controlled narratives of power and success as their own, with blacks on the outside looking in from the margins. As Black Star's lyrics will demonstrate, hip-hop reclaims narratives of power and success as ghetto narratives, thus dethroning whiteness and liberating the oppressed conditions normatively supposed upon blackness.

Chapter One

“As we proceed to give you what you need...”

- Notorious B.I.G.

Black Star’s *Little Brother* is the song that will begin this musical journey, tapping into rich African-American cultural reservoirs across generations.[†] When the track comes on, the first thing the listener is aware of is the smooth instrumental loop. Immediately the snare drums kick in, setting a driving tone. It’s a beat that evokes a sense of determination. Literally, the beat cannot and will not be stopped. Though the first words heard are those of Mos Def, as he vamps and introduces the duo, the listener can’t help but be struck by the vocal sample that loops in the background with the beat. Spoken gently, but stirringly, the phrase “Now Listen,” can be heard immediately and throughout the track. The emphasis here is on the fact that it doesn’t sound like a demand, the voice sounds subdued. More often than not, artists who have the lyrical proficiency of Mos Def or Talib Kweli find that their words and the messages contained within can go unheard, or completely misunderstood, given the complexity of their rhyme schemes. Though the audience may be nodding along to the track, they aren’t really ‘listening’. Knowing this, it makes the vocal sample all the more stirring. Ultimately, the ball is in the audience’s court if he/she wants to hear what the artist is really saying.

[†] I have included a mixtape that should accompany this reading. Each of the songs I discuss can be heard in full, as they were meant to be encountered. Though lyrical and literary analysis is necessary to fully illumine the complexities that unfold over the course of each song, the musical form is not whole unless we approach it as the artist intended for us to hear. I’ve also tried to include as many of the spirituals as well for the same reason. The audio accompaniment is meant to augment my reader’s experience, getting them into the music; hearing it rather than hearing *of* it.

Hip-hop artists simply speak what they know and see, what they've lived through experience. Black Star doesn't proselytize, but rather they speak truth to life.

From the outset, the two emcees set about problematizing the way ghetto life is understood. Although they portray the harsh conditions of the ghetto, they immediately identify themselves as being of and for its members. The first verse begins when Mos Def asks Talib Kweli, "who we rep?" to which he responds, "we rep the ain't-gots."⁵ This could be viewed from afar as a miserable condition, but this is not how Black Star treats being an 'ain't-got'. In line with the liberation theology of the spirituals, before, even the deepest despair is overcome by the profound hope in the fact that "trouble will not have the last word".⁶ This hope is rooted in the 'dogged strength' black slaves showed "to keep from being torn asunder"⁷ in a country where their skin color meant they were subhuman. Both emcees bring to life for the listener the jungle-like living conditions of America's inner cities from the perspective of their particular Brooklyn neighborhood, or the habitat of the 'ain't-gots'.

*From Hallsey to St. Mark's, walkin' the main blocks /
Painted with blood that's still hot, so deep it stain socks /⁸*

There's no escaping the institutional violence of life in the ghetto for African-Americans. The ghetto lifestyle is directly linked to the chain of events from slavery, through reconstruction, white-flight and the subsequent abandonment of social services that left blacks in America's urban centers to fight for themselves. The American

⁵ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

⁶ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991. Pg 67.

⁷ DuBois, William Edward Burghardt., and Herbert Aptheker. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973.

⁸ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

economy is another institution in this country that maintains power hierarchies both in terms of race and class. For many black youths in the ghetto, surrounded by the trappings of poverty, the images of fast cash and symbols of wealth that can be obtained in the illegitimate economy seem the best option. It's not like one has the luxury to choose how to make a living when there are mouths to feed and it's not certain where the next meal is coming from. The metaphor may be extreme, but the reality isn't far behind. James Baldwin spoke of the ghetto population's incessant need for an outlet, as if they were caged animals, in his essay *Notes of a Native Son*. According to Baldwin, who grew up in Harlem, New York, "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need."⁹ This violent urge is the natural instinct of something or someone who has been backed into a corner, for whom there seems to exist no other recourse. Such is the plight of the black diaspora in America. But consciously and unconsciously, whiteness has asserted its racial and cultural dominance over black so much so that even when 'free', black people found themselves pushed into America's urban centers, from which white and middle class Americans fled for the suburbs. This is not to say that no white people live in the ghetto, but like Mos Def tells it from his experience, when he looks around at his ghetto neighbors he finds his 'hood to be "Black like Morehouse".¹⁰ Though they may have been free of the shackles of slavery, blacks felt the forces applied by white-America as entrapping, like a wall that kept them held down in the.

The violence that created the impoverished environment of the ghetto is embodied in the blacks who inhabit it. Mos Def continues his verse:

⁹ Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985. Pg 144.

¹⁰ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

*Shorties goin' all out, they got they swords drawn out /
 Ready to brawl out, getting' fought 'til they fall out /
 A jungle out here /
 Lions keep they claws out, fangs and jaws out /
 Weak just get forced out /¹¹*

The violence seems never-ending, so long as the forces that keep blacks trapped in the projects of America's ghettos exist; "as long as the ghetto walls are standing there will always come a moment when these [violent] outlets do not work."¹² And when they don't, it leaves black bodies with a major existential breakdown on the horizon, without a guiding theology. The constant battles to make a way out of no way can make ghetto youth feel as if they have to fight, until "they fall out." Survival of the fittest pits the ghetto community against itself in competition for its limited resources. Ghetto violence hurts blacks in a major physical and spiritual way. Those who don't have the mental fortitude to constantly stay on the grind won't make it.

James Cone speaks of the importance of the theology behind slave spirituals to black cultural and spiritual preservation. The spirituals were the slaves' divine answer to the problem of their being a 'problem' by virtue of their skin color. Trouble would not have the last word.

Penultimately, white masters may torture and kill slaves capriciously, and the world seem only chaos and absurdity. But ultimately God is in control and black slaves believed that they had encountered the infinite significance of God's liberation. And so they lifted up their voices and sang.¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985. Pg 144.

¹³ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991. Pg 67.

This hope, the source of which is black slaves' interpretation of Judeo-Christian Exodus narrative for self-affirmation in the face of the worst of mankind's ills[†], runs alongside the emcee's storytelling. Despite the tough challenges facing inner-city blacks, Black Star has a positive take on the situation. Mos Def directs his message to a younger audience as his verse ends:

*I thought bout the wild circumstance we born out /
Remember myself at your age, when I was just like you /
If that was now, I don't know what I would do /
My answer's closest to me /
So what I say to you is goin' for me /
Son we both still growin' indeed /
But where you at, I was, and where you been, I left /
Utilize my experience to guide your step /¹⁴*

Mos echoes the sentiment that is at the heart of hip-hop emceeing. He is speaking truth to and from his experience. Though his words come from within his own world-view, drawing upon his distinct epistemic resources, they can still resonate with others, across generations. This is the essence of what hip-hop refers to as 'realness'. The idea stretches far back in black cultural history to the blues, which gave birth to the dictum that "Truth is experience and experience is the Truth. If it is lived and encountered, then it is real."¹⁵ Ralph Basui Watkins helps that maxim within hip-hop culture:

[†] The liberating theology behind the slave spirituals will receive the full scrutiny it deserves in the coming pages, when I enter into a more robust account of the source of God's liberating force for blacks.

¹⁴ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

¹⁵ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991. Pg 106.

The redemptive principle in hip-hop is rooted in the truth in the stories that artists tell as they resonate with both their own lived experience and that of their listeners. It is the lived, historical experience that makes hip-hop truthful.¹⁶

As Talib Kweli comes back in to finish the verse leading into the chorus, he speaks directly to his listener. Mos already ‘came with the real,’ to use hip-hop lexicon, or spoke truth from experience, so as to connect with his audience. The bond has been formed; the listener is intent on receiving guidance. Kweli prefaces his directive with more ‘real’ rhymes before he offers strategies for ghetto survival.

*Lemme drop this on ya, look they gotchu cornered /
The corner of the block is hot, I ain't got to warn ya /*

Now, of course, there aren’t physical walls to restrain and force ghetto youth into a corner. He is using metaphor to express the sentiment of many young blacks in the ghetto, who feel the pressure of being strapped for cash and having to scratch and claw “just to get by”[♣]. This mentality leads to competition amongst them and violence is a direct result. The cycle can leave ghetto youth feeling cornered. The block is ‘hot’, meaning there are a lot of guns in the neighborhood streets on the daily. ‘Heat’ is a popular hip-hop term for a firearm. The heat also implies combustibility, the corner being ‘hot’ means it could break out into violence at any time, given the fact that many have the potential to do physical harm to each other with their weapons.

¹⁶ Watkins, Ralph Basui. *Hip-hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pg 42.

[♣] *Just to Get By* is the title of one of Talib Kweli’s solo hits, the lyrics to which are included in the song appendix at the end of this work.

All the while, the gentle but powerful refrain of “Now Listen,” has been repeating every few bars, and by now the audience is drawn in fully to what Kweli has in store. He saves his guiding words for last, as the hope emerges out of the miserable conditions of the ghetto.

*Niggas wanna destroy each other in a cypher instead a' build /
 Be a man of will, don't be standin' still /
 If you- don't plan ahead, then you- plan to fail /
 Can't wait for opportunity to knock, you gotta make it happen /
 It ain't about no spectacular ways a' rappin' /
 Just immaculate ways a' action, dig?*¹⁷

Action is the key for ghetto youth, though not just any kind of activity is the right kind. Kweli's use of immaculate is the guiding word that directs the youth away from whatever illegal temptations the ghetto glamorizes. Mos Def says earlier in his verse, “Ghetto-fame is sought out / you wanna be the one that they talk ‘bout /” pointing out the pull of the illicit ghetto economy that offers fast reward but high risk of imprisonment or death, both of which plague urban black male populations in this country. ‘Hustling’ has come to be associated with drug-dealing and illegal activities, but I would like to contend that the term's true definition can be found in the message of these bars. The hustle is an everyday reality that members of America's inner cities know all too well. Hustling is knowing how to survive in a world that's set up for you to fail. Dr. Mahalia Ann Hines, mother of Common, a world famous hip-hop artist, refers to herself as a hustler in that same light:

¹⁷ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

That's why, as black people, we've had to strive so hard to develop a hustler's instinct and pass it on to our children. You have a door closed in your face? You have to learn how to pick the lock or maybe just knock it off the hinges.¹⁸

But even in the face of all this hardship, the constant need to hustle a way through one day at a time, and the danger, from the institutional violence that keeps them in their current place, to the physical dangers of living in the ghetto, black youth should keep their heads up, according to Mos and Talib in their chorus at the end of the track. The hopeful message resounds deeply with each repetition.

*Little Brother,
I know that times is hard /
Keep your mind on guard /
Stay clear of the dangers and harm /
You'll get along /
I sing my song /
For little brothers,
Out there in the street /
Strugglin' to make ends meet /
Gotta hold the heat /
Strugglin' so hard to compete /
Stay clear of the dangers and harm /
Stay on the job /
Try to stay strong /
Keep movin' on (x6)¹⁹*

Just as W.E.B. DuBois said it takes “dogged strength” for the American negro to keep from being “torn asunder” by the eye of whiteness, it takes that same strength of

¹⁸ Common, and Adam Bradley. *One Day It'll All Make Sense: a Memoir*. New York: Atria, 2011. Pg 14.

¹⁹ Black Star. "Little Brother." J Dilla, 1999.

character for a young black person growing up in the ghettos of today's America to avoid the allure of the illicit lifestyles that can become glamorized in urban society. Despite rejecting the institution of the Mainline Black Church, Mos Def and Talib Kweli affirm the fact that God is a part of the process of staying strong. Just like the slaves, who found their source of Hope in God's liberating action on behalf of the Jews in Egypt, as detailed in Exodus, hip-hop finds hope in the same fundamental belief that God is with blacks, as God is with all oppressed people on this earth. The difference is that hip-hop draws from the biblical example provided by the story of Joseph as a means of reclaiming freedom in a land where being "free" historically meant being three-fifths human.

Chapter Two

“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole”²⁰

- Author Unknown

In his work, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James Cone acknowledges that, through the power of song, black slaves discovered a God distinct and more powerful than the God that whites were forcing upon them. This discovery strengthened their faith in God and in their own humanity. He and Howard Thurman have written extensively on the subject of black liberation theology, with the former credited as being one of its defining thinkers. Cone identified the many cultural and theological events that formulated modes of thinking, given the rich history of blackness in America. He drew from those uniting themes that could reconcile his deep faith in the Christian tradition with his blackness.

The spirituals emerged out of the conditions of slavery in America. Black slaves were faced everyday with the worst mankind had to offer them. They were bound to work for whites, as subhuman, in a country that institutionalized and legalized their dehumanization. To appropriate language made famous by Cornel West, the great American paradox remains to this day that the beautiful freedom that we enjoy as a nation was built around, and still struggles with to this day, the enslavement of Africans and African-Americans. For slaves, the everyday struggle took as much of a spiritual toll as it did a physical one. How were blacks to make sense of their place in the world as a free spirit when every outside indication was forcing them into what blackness meant for whites? Surrounded by oppression, overwhelmed by cruelty at the hands of white

²⁰ (Author Unknown). *There Is A Balm in Gilead*.

masters, black slaves had the tools to question God. “Is faith in God possible when the righteousness of God seems to be absent in everyday affairs?”²¹

In singing the spirituals, black slaves did not question God’s righteousness, as they held that to be assured. The spirituals were centered on their earthly suffering, “there was no attempt to evade the reality”²² of it.

Oh, Lord, Oh My Lord!
*Oh, My Good Lord! Keep me from sinkin’ down.*²³

The singers of the spirituals were concerned with their ability to maintain the “dogged strength” required to shoulder the burden of being black in America, of being a slave, and to wear the ‘burden’ of their blackness with pride.

The only condition that those blacks who were enslaved knew was one of complete and utter oppression. On every level, all outside indication was targeted to diminish their ‘somebodiness’ at every turn. Black Slaves were legally recognized as less than human, as property, with no more right to governmental protection than a plow or a hoe. They were tools of labor and nothing more in the eyes of the whites in power. Through its very creation and maintenance (being as it is a nebulous creation of the mind), whiteness built itself upon the representation of blackness as sub-white. This led to DuBois’ notion of “double consciousness” among African-Americans, or the sensibility of understanding one’s self through the gaze of the other. It was a struggle for blacks just to affirm themselves as human, as the “veil” of blackness affixed a lesser

²¹ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991. Pg 56.

²² Ibid. Pg 57.

²³ (Unknown Author), *Keep Me From Sinking Down*. Cone, Pg. 57.

status to their bodies.²⁴ Their lives were disposable to white masters, who considered their life and death little more than “a matter of bookkeeping”.²⁵

From a theological standpoint, it makes a lot of sense that the singers of spirituals would look to the Exodus narrative for the inspiration to “walk [their] lonesome valley”.²⁶ Exodus confirmed for them that God was on their side, as God had a history of enacting divine justice on behalf of the oppressed. The Exodus narrative recounted the toils of the Jews in Egypt and their eventual liberation through God’s direct action. Even in a climate where overt allusions to desire for freedom could get black slaves killed, many spirituals make overt references to the Jews’ liberation from under the Pharaoh’s oppressive rule:

*When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go;
Go down, Moses, ’way down in Egypt’s land;
Tell ole Pharaoh
Let my people go.*²⁷

Given that all the slaves knew were the oppressive conditions of slavery, the story of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt into the land of Canaan represented their deep desire for freedom. For the slaves of the American South, Canaan was the northern states. Black slaves were assured in their belief in God’s liberation, that God would free

²⁴ DuBois, William Edward Burghardt., and Herbert Aptheker. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973. Pg 3.

²⁵ Thurman, Howard. *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1975.

²⁶ (Unknown Author), *I Got to Walk it For Myself*. Cone, Pg. 60.

²⁷ (Unknown Author), *Let My People Go*. Cone, Pg. 41.

them from the bondage of slavery because of the biblical text they had encountered.

Though they rejected the white man's Christianity as a tool of oppression, they drew from the bible, specifically the Exodus story, a new theology of liberation. God cared about them because God has shown [God's] self to be on the side of the oppressed throughout history:

The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings."²⁸

Black slaves identified fully with the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. Whites were their 'Pharaoh' and God is the eternal God, who remains on the side of the oppressed. The Exodus narrative gave them the strength to find strength in what others saw was their unavoidable weakness: their very condition of having black skin. God favored blackness, according to the liberation theology carved out by black slaves. Just as God recognized the suffering of the Israelites, [God] would end their miserable condition in America. That was a theological fact, but also an earthly fact, as God had acted on behalf of the oppressed before, there was precedent for [God's] doing so again on behalf of the oppressed in America. They drew from the biblical example of God's liberation to develop self-worth in a climate that offered them none and attempted to squash every effort blacks made at attaining it. God of Exodus was the deliverer of the "least of these":

So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey,²⁹

²⁸ Exodus 3:7 (New American Standard Bible)

²⁹ Exodus 3:8 (New American Standard Bible)

The theology behind the spirituals was rooted in this narrative of God's liberation, which located freedom elsewhere from the location of suffering. It's natural to want to flee oppression for a land of 'milk and honey'. Freedom represented a geographical relocation according to Exodus language and, therefore, that is how slaves came to understand the concept of freedom. Metaphors of motion became a powerful means of reaching freedom. This migrating metaphor can be readily seen in spiritual rhetoric. Black slaves were on the move. They were bound for the 'land of milk and honey,' or the North and the freedom from slavery it surely held for them. For black slaves, their current state meant only just that, slavery. The motion metaphor, based on the Israelites' journey to Canaan, became an important means of connecting to the God-granted liberated state that the exodus narrative promised them.

*De gospel train's a-comin',
I hear it jus' at han',
I hear de car wheels movin',
An' rumblin' thro de lan'.*

*De fare is cheap, an' all can go,
De rich an' poor are dere,
No second class a-board dis train,
No difference in de fare.*

*Git on board, little chillen,
Git on board, little chillen,
Git on board, little chillen,
Dere's room for many a mo'.³⁰*

³⁰ (Unknown Author), *The Gospel Train's A'Comin'*. Cone, Pg. 85.

By God's grace, the black slaves were headed to the Promised Land, where they would be free men and women, free to live their lives in peace and prosperity. This was the profound hope expressed in spirituals like *Sweet Canaan's Happy Land*:

*Oh, the land I am bound for
Sweet Canaan's happy land.³¹*

The Promised Land, or the biblical Canaan, was not a distant theological metaphor for slaves so much as it was a distinct geographical reality. Frederick Douglass made this reality explicit in his autobiographical work, *Life and times of Frederick Douglass*: “We meant to reach the *North*, and the *North* was our Canaan.”³²

Given the focus on the Exodus narrative of the Israelites and their flight from the oppression of Egypt to God-granted freedom, it stands that the source of theological hope for black slaves was the promise of liberation from their oppressed state. The biblical precedent had been set, and just as [God] had done before, God would intervene in earthly affairs on behalf of the oppressed blacks, delivering them unto the North, where ‘milk and honey’ awaited them. This is why black slaves could sing songs that detailed the worst of human suffering and still gain from them the most profound hope a people can come to know.

*Nobody knows de trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows de trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!³³*

³¹ (Unknown Author), *Sweet Canaan's Happy Land*.

³² Douglass, Frederick, and Frederick Douglass. *Life and times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History*. New York: Collier, 1962. Pg 159.

³³ (Unknown Author). *Nobody Knows De Trouble I've Seen*. Cone, Pg 58.

“Glory, Hallelujah!” represents the unwavering faith in God’s divine liberating force on earth, according to Exodus’ historical precedent. “It was the affirmation of faith,”³⁴ the hope that served their existential need for an end to seek. Exodus was the basis for the hope that enabled slaves to persevere, providing them with the strength to “keep from sinkin’ down”.

Blacks would soon find the freedom in this country that they had come to expect through their belief in the liberating God they had adopted from the Exodus narrative. Though emancipation had ended the institution of slavery, it did little to overcome the deep racial divide between black and white and, to this day, many of the same conceptions of race have endured and continue to inform American culture. It’s out of this uneasy climate that hip-hop was born.

³⁴ Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991. Pg 58.

Chapter Three

“The city is awake, it’s alive and well...”³⁵

- J-Live

Hip-hop emerged in a climate of turmoil in America’s urban centers. The Reagan and Bush administrations did a major disservice to the underprivileged, dismantling state protections for the poor, namely blacks, and the environment. The two administrations most regrettably fostered a government that was “more concerned with protecting capital than protecting the rights of ordinary citizens.”³⁶ There was a mass ‘evacuation’ of the urban centers by white Americans to the surrounding suburban areas; a response to a few factors, most notably the great migration of blacks from the South to the cities of the North, as well as the subsequent supreme court decisions to integrate the nation’s school system. James Baldwin spoke of the dynamic, after his visit to Atlanta:

With sunset each day the city became a black enclave. The white flee by way of the bristling system of freeways- known as ‘ring around the Congo.’ The South might on the surface be “new”, but there is absolutely nothing new in this city, this state or this nation... America had found a way to have its cake and eat it, too. It had turned over the inner city to the backs, given them the vote and even the control of city hall, but had preserved both separation and real economic power; It’s a concession masking the face of power, which remains white.³⁷

It was these conditions that Grandmaster Flash spoke to when he rhymed his famous line from *The Message*, “It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from

³⁵ J-Live. "The City." By Dela. *Changes Of Atmosphere*. Select-O-Hits, Inc., 2009.

³⁶ Watkins, Ralph Basui. *Hip-hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pg 48.

³⁷ Leeming, David Adams. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Pg 362.

going under.”³⁸ As Melle Mel and other member of the hip hop generation had come to realize, the ghetto had been abandoned and its inhabitants left to fend for themselves.

White-flight may have left blacks to themselves in America’s city centers, but there were significant fractures developing within the black community. The flight from the suburbs was not a whites-only affair. Many middle-income blacks moved out of the city as well, bound for the old suburbs, newly created suburbs and more residential areas of America’s cities. This left the black poor isolated both socially and physically. Therefore, statistically, a vast majority of the membership of the Mainline Black Church was made up of middle class blacks.³⁹ Poor blacks in America’s urban centers were theologically isolated from the traditions of the Black Church. Further, the predominant voices of the major denominations of the Black Church spoke against hip-hop, having bifurcated the spirituals, gospel, and hymns as ‘sacred’, considering the emerging genre as profane. Despite this, the genre would help cultivate a theological transformation in America’s ghettos. Hip-hop was nurtured by the “very streets from which the African American Church retreated and now finds difficult to reach.”⁴⁰

While whites and members of the Black church fled the city centers, in accordance with the exodus narratives that had been privileged in Judeo-Christian tradition, to pursue the American version of Canaan, the urban black poor, abandoned had a theological awakening. The Exodus narrative was meant to transport blacks to freedom, as they thought it had done so, but in reality, as Baldwin so poignantly noted

³⁸ Grandmaster, Flash, and Mel Melle. "The Message." *Message from Beat Street: The Best of Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel & The Furious Five*. Rhino, 1994.

³⁹ Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. Pg 3.

⁴⁰ Watkins, Ralph Basui. *Hip-hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pg 51.

earlier, they hadn't left 'Egypt'. The same racial, social, and economic problems persisted in American society. Just as the slaves before them had sought a theological means of maintaining strength in difficult times, the hip-hop generation was born out of a need to find meaning and worth in America's abandoned ghettos, in which they found themselves held in place by American institutions hell-bent on keeping them in their place. As the church turned away from them, hip-hop turned away from Exodus tradition, instead finding a new hero and a new narrative to keep them "from goin' under": Genesis' Joseph story.

One needn't look twice to easily see the circumstantial parallels between the Joseph story and the black experience in America. Joseph's brother betrayed him by selling him into Egyptian Slavery. The history of blacks in America begins with Africans stolen from their homeland and brought to the 'New World' as slaves. Joseph, like blacks in America, continued to be treated with contempt and punished wrongfully. After his Egyptian master throws him in prison on false accusations, Joseph endures for years, faithfully, until he transcends the limitations others have tried to place on him to become an important leader in Egypt, single-handedly avoid famine. Through his determination Joseph managed to transcend the limitations of his oppressed situation. "The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered,"⁴¹ is an important theological point as black liberation theology is reframed from its focus on Exodus to being centered on Joseph's narrative. Joseph did not have to go anywhere, to escape or flee to a new land. He was still in Egypt, and yet he became a successful man. He did not pack up and relocate, but rather he reshaped his world to liberate himself and others.

⁴¹ Genesis 39:2 (New American Standard Bible)

The move away from relocating metaphors is the fundamental difference between the spirituals and hip-hop. For the singers of the spirituals, freedom was the end goal. Black slaves knew of a “Balm in Gilead” and other representations of a promised land, as described in the Exodus tradition. Hip-hop remixes the foundations of black liberation theology by not seeking a home elsewhere, but rather by finding beauty in their current condition, which was abandonment in the ghettos of America.

The ghetto, for hip-hop represents something much more than simply a physical location. The city is a living, breathing thing. It’s alive, just like its inhabitants.

Just like *Little Brother*, Black Star’s *Respiration* contains a repeating vocal sample that runs in the background for the duration of the song. A sensual female voice speaks in Spanish, “Escuchela... la ciudad respirando.”⁴² Or, “Listen to it... the city breathing,” which enables the listener to see the song in a completely different light. The respiration that the title alludes to is not that of a person, but of the ghetto itself. By the time Mos Def comes on with his first verse, the stage is set for a portrait to be painted of the city as a complex relationship between the city itself, the circumstances of its inhabitants, and its inhabitants themselves.

Skyscrapers is colossus, /
the cost of living is preposterous, /
stay alive, you play or die, no options /
No batman and robin, /
can't tell between the cops and the robbers, /
*they both partners, they all heartless, with no conscience, /*⁴³

⁴² Black Star and Common. "Respiration." *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

⁴³ Ibid

Mos shows how inhabitants of the ghetto have few options for mobility and even fewer allies along the way. The police, though they may be expected to serve and protect, have historically been non-allies of ghetto life, given their normative gaze that tends to criminalize members of the ghetto. For many police officers, who are often depicted as white and Irish, according to the predominant numbers, the black body and darkness has come to represent the ‘shadiness’ of the urban underworld; the darker the appearance, the more real the potential for illegal activities.

*My eagle talons stay sharpened, like city lights stay throbbin’ /
You either make a way or stay sobbin’, /
The shiny apple is bruised but sweet
and if you choose to eat you could lose your teeth, /⁴⁴*

Ghetto survival requires predator sense. You are either predator or pray, ‘play or die’, there is no other option. Again this hustler’s mentality references earlier in this project runs throughout hip-hop. There are no options other than to provide for your family, for yourself, even when doors close in front of you. Pry them open; kick them down, but to do so requires an eternal source of strength, which can be found in the reframed liberating hope of Joseph’s stoicism. Survival is a key term because hip-hop, like all genres of black music, is an effort at cultural preservation. “Hip-hop lyrics represent the sentiments and struggles of those on the margins of American society. This otherness represented in hip-hop culture takes on a political dynamic of resistance and survival.”⁴⁵ With Joseph as a role model, hip-hop artists embrace their everyday

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Watkins, Ralph Basui. *Hip-hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pg 53.

experience by being “real life documentarians”⁴⁶ and speaking as a witness to ghetto life. Every detail, from the most violent, sexual, or beautiful, is all there, transparent. Culture is reported upon and maintained through this system. The ghetto, like it or not, is the cultural center of hip-hop culture and, thus, it has become an imperative piece of black culture and identity for those who come from America’s urban centers. Rappers ‘rep’ their hometowns proudly, even as they detail the trials and tribulations of growing up there, as can be seen in rapper Common’s guest verse on *Respiration*:

*Outta the city, they want us gone /
Tearin’ down the ‘jects creatin’ plush homes /
My circumstance is between Cabrini and Love Jones[†] /
Surrounded by hate, yet I love home /⁴⁷*

The ‘they’ here is the white power structure, who first forced blacks into the ghettos and projects of America and then sought to develop for wealthier residents. That last line echoes the sentiments of Joseph’s stoicism. Joseph was surrounded by hate, on the part of his brothers and his masters, but he loved outwardly and loved God. Common and many other blacks in the ghetto can be surrounded by the hateful circumstances of the ghetto, namely the physical, social, structural, and institutional violence that pushed blacks to the margins of the ghetto, and can love that very place that whites attribute negative qualities to. In the face of the worst of mankind, blacks can affirm their humanity and the ghetto identity is a large part of the cultural and theological preservation that enables this remix to occur. This notion is echoed in the chorus:

⁴⁶ Black Star. "Intro." *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

[†] “Love Jones” was a 1997 romantic comedy set in Chicago, in which the leads are middle-class. Cabrini is a reference to the Cabrini-Green projects.

⁴⁷ Black Star and Common. "Respiration." *Mos Def & Taleb Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

*So much on my mind I just can't recline /
Blastin' holes in the night 'til she bled sunshine*⁴⁸

The night can symbolize many things in terms of black liberation theology. It can represent the numbness of the oppressed state. It also represents the despair that comes with being black, in the DuBois-ian sense. “Blastin’ holes” is a metaphor for the profound hope behind black liberation theology, reframed by hip-hop to model after Joseph. Just as Joseph didn’t try to relocate, but transformed his condition, so must blacks not seek sunlight elsewhere, but blast holes in the darkness that covers them until it bleeds light. The theology of the Joseph story is not passive. There’s no indication here that night would ever give way to day without the active participation of all the ghetto’s inhabitants in transforming their condition on this earth.

The fact that the ghetto can be as tough an environment to grow up in but still, someone like Common can say “I love home,” is an example of this Joseph-style transformative action taking place in the real world on an everyday basis through hip-hop. “Some call it heaven and others call it hell,” but regardless, it is what it is and it is up to the artist to be a witness to truth, whether that truth chronicles love, beauty and happiness, or hatred, violence and sorrow. Good or bad, hateful or loving, black liberation theology of hip-hop calls us to tap into the source of hope that can empower us to liberate our present day and therefore our futures. It fosters community in a world in which, so often, people are focused on burning bridges and separating themselves from others.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The transformation of Egypt into Canaan, for hip-hop, is re-imagining the condition of being stuck in the ghetto to being a part of the imagined ghetto of hip-hop, which represents so much more. If race is a nebulous construct of the mind, such a re-imagination is a profound liberation of the soul, white or black.

Chapter Four

“I am the American Dream.”

- Nas

No empowering conception of being black in America's urban centers can come about without a meaningful interrogation of the forces at play that maintain whiteness as the mainstream mode of being in America. In American public spaces, the black cultural view is marginal because whiteness pushes it to the margins. It is inconceivable, when blinded by the white normative gaze, to possibly consider that a black world view, like black liberation theology, could be at the center of the universe. The very way in which the relationship is framed reinforces this impossibility. Non-whites have been come to be defined as ‘minority’, which already positions whiteness as the ‘majority’ against other races. The language of majority and minority has everything to do with positionality. Given different geographical locations, there is bound to be a different make up of varying races and creeds. In America's urban centers, the ‘minorities’ strongly outnumber whites, yet this concept of ‘less than’ persists in America's racial lexicon. Why is this the case, when, in fact, every individual on earth is positioned by his or her own world view? The answer lies in an examination of the normative white gaze that dominates American discourse. Like many other hip-hop artists, Black Star is in direct dialogue with this gaze, challenging the notion that whiteness is the cultural center of the American universe.

Throughout this country's history, Americans have engineered a system of socio-political status on the basis of skin color. Black was immediately selected to be second class, so as to preserve whiteness as dominant. This has to be the case because race is not

a natural or personal reality in the world, but a political one.⁴⁹ Color does not intrinsically hold any weight beyond the physical realm. Therefore, the fact that America places value on whiteness and blackness, with the former valued much more highly, has to be hashed out. While Exodus tells us that we can free the oppressive representations of racial discourse, Joseph understands that we can't be free of race until we interrogate it to the fullest. Only then is liberation possible through the truth of experience. When American narratives come from outside the normative white gaze, as with Black Star's music, it provides a chance to examine exactly what constitutes whiteness.

DuBois' notion of the "double consciousness" hits at the heart of this dilemma for black people in America. How am I supposed to see myself as whole when every outside indication tells me that I am 'less than'? Whiteness conceives of blackness as a veil that covers black individuals. The veil is impenetrable because whiteness delineates what black is to be, meaning that whiteness doesn't truly *see* black individuals, but rather just their black skin and all the representations they have associated with that skin. Whiteness rules the domain of blackness and defines what it means to be black. The fact that whiteness creates and maintains the language through which race is understood is what maintains the race concept as an American personal reality.

I can think of no more stirring example of this as when, in 2010, CNN's Anderson Cooper helped conduct a survey of young boys and girls, black and white, by showing them pictures of different skin complexions and asking them questions to see how they understood skin color. The vast majority of the boys and girls, when asked questions along the lines of "which of these skin colors do you think people like more?" choose the whitest image. In that same vein, when asked questions, such as, "show me the [skin

⁴⁹ Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. New York: Dell, 1963. Pg 104.

color] most children would think looks bad,” an equal majority chose the darkest skin tone available. The study also found that over seventy percent of the black children surveyed displayed the same conceptions of race, that white is better than black.⁵⁰ These results show the difficult condition of being black in America’s urban centers. The ghetto is linguistically ‘encysted’. Whiteness, which is really a series of unexamined, normative assumptions that lead to a mode of being that one is “white”, controls the languages through which the ghetto is understood. Blacks are kept from going beyond the veil, or getting behind whites’ definitions of them.

In America’s public spaces, there are no languages for blacks to discuss their state, except for those used to normalize racial difference and subjugation. Black Star’s lyrics are an example of the positive cultural force of hip-hop. When American conceptions of race tell blacks that they are a “problem”, that they are ugly somehow, Mos Def and Talib Kweli paint a much different picture; one that celebrates blackness through love and through the beauty of life’s experiences in the ghetto. The first lines of the introduction to their album state their aim quite clearly,

*We feel that we have a responsibility to... shine the light... into the darkness.*⁵¹

In the face of the racial intolerance that has been codified into America’s systems and structures, Black Star’s music flips the script on the white normative gaze. In reframing normative discourse about blacks and about the ghetto, Black Star is engaged

⁵⁰ O'Brian, Soledad, Anderson Cooper, and Margaret Beale Spencer. *AC360: Doll Study Research*. Rep. CNN, 28 Apr. 2010. Web.

<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2010/images/05/13/expanded_results_methods_cnn.pdf>.

⁵¹ Black Star. "Intro." *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

in a profound liberation of the black spirit, in the Joseph sense. In their song,

RE:DEFinition, Talib's first verse echoes this sentiment:

*RE:DEFinition /
Turning your play into a tragedy*⁵²

This line embodies the Joseph liberating sensibility, the idea that through a reframing of the current oppressive state, liberation can be found within that very space. In their Joseph-ian sense of liberation, Black Star is in dialogue with James Baldwin, who similarly "RE:DEFined" the way blackness was and is thought of in America. Baldwin took DuBois' original language of the "Negro Problem" and flipped it on its head. For Baldwin, if blacks continued throughout the history of this country continued to meet institutionalized hate with love, whether that love was for God, for self, for other, or for all three, then it was not blackness that was the problem in America. For Baldwin, the problem wasn't a "Negro problem," but a question of white identity and pathology.⁵³ Baldwin saw that whites needed to hold blacks as inferior and so they created language to maintain that condition. To be black is to be human, just as it is with being white. The fact that subjugation based on race was created means that whites have to engage in a self-investigation as to why this happens, or else America is doomed to be bogged down in racism for a long time to come. When Black Star and James Baldwin transform racial discourse in America from a black problem to a white problem, they are actively involved in human liberation, black and white. Baldwin wrote to bring love, whether sexual, religious, or familial to the forefront of the American conscience. Black Star is

⁵² Black Star. "RE:DEFinition." *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

⁵³ Hardy, Clarence E. *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2003. Pg 84.

engaged in that same effort, to bring love to listeners through the speakers. Mos Def and Talib Kweli challenge whiteness' position at the center of its own universe with a narrative of their own ghetto experience, with their blackness featuring proudly and prominently in the center. When approached from this theological angle, even lines as simple as Kweli's in one of his verses on the song *K.O.S. (Determination)*,

*That's why I've got love in the face of hate /
Hands steady so the lines in the mental illustration are straight /,*⁵⁴

Express hip-hop's power as a medium for self-liberation. The love Kweli is talking about here is not a passive one, but an extremely active process. Kweli, like Baldwin is calling that which he loves to be the very highest it can be. Nobody critiqued America with harsher words than James Baldwin, though Baldwin maintained that nobody loved America more deeply than he. His love was an active love, like that of Kweli in *K.O.S (Determination)*, not prompting a passive attitude but an actively engaged means to define a new language of blackness. To redefine racial language hierarchies is to transform the oppressed condition of blackness into a liberating agent. Kweli and Baldwin refuse to be defined by any outside forces, or live behind a veil. They chose to *RE:DEFine* racial categories, organically creating and experiencing authentic black culture. Black Star's use of the ghetto shows the way this *RE:DEFinition* can transform not only perceptions of self, but also of the space that persons inhabit.

White flight and the move of the Mainline Black church towards the middle class suburban areas, served to reinforce definitions of which spaces were deemed best for living, much in the same way whiteness deemed which skin color was best. The same

⁵⁴ Black Star. "K.O.S. (Determination)." *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 1998.

representations that had been applied to being black in America became synonymous with life in America's urban centers. The children in the CNN study selected black over white indicating the institutional and structural racism that had permeated American culture so deeply that children as young as six years old already understood race to be a personal reality. Similarly, when every outside indication coming from American public discourse on living spaces is telling you that the goal is to live in the suburbs in a house with a white picket fence, just as white people had done in mass exodus post 1980, those living in the ghetto look upon their living conditions as "less than." The same racial discourse is at play behind representations of the ghetto as a negative space.

Black Star isn't only *RE:DEFining* blackness but reframing the way in which the ghetto is treated in American discourse, showing it to be a place of beauty and love, simply because it is the central geographical metaphor locating hip-hop artists. They return to the metaphor and strive to embody the ghetto because, the re-imagined space is an example of black liberation from white conceptions of living standards. To reiterate, in spite of the white dominated rhetoric through which black urban life is understood from afar, the ghetto emerges as an organic cultural reinforcement of the somebodinness of blacks in America. All throughout *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*, the two Brooklyn emcees restructure and reframe their audience's conceptions of blackness and the ghetto as liberating spaces, contrary to the American narrative of blackness as something far less than white.

Talib and Mos' narratives as successful hip-hop musicians, gaining critical acclaim and making a career for themselves as artists is in line with the Joseph narrative in itself. They, along with many other hip-hop artists in the public consciousness, are

actively engaged in redefining the way in which success is represented in America. Whiteness has been associated with success, having permeated the American dream concept. The goal of American life is to achieve white success, a suburban house with a white picket fence, a far cry from the gritty urban reality for hip-hop artists in the ghetto. But in reality, success has no race, it has no prototypical narrative. Success can happen anywhere. For proof just look to the biblical example of the Joseph story. As Baldwin and Black Star bring to their audience's consciousness, we get further and further away from Truth when we fail to unpack the socio-political, cultural and institutional baggage that skin color has come to claim over America's troubled racial history.

The music of Black Star embraces Mos and Talib's being products of the ghetto and situates themselves firmly within it. Though it seems to the white normative gaze that such a position is on the fringe, in reality that is due to the faults of the gaze itself. Hip-hop artists, like Talib Kweli and Mos Def, claim beauty for the ghetto, also claiming the mainstream for the ghetto as well. In this way, hip-hop re-imagines classic American conceptions of success, like the American dream, which is steep in exodus tradition. Instead of leaving where you are in search of something better, claim what's yours as best. Black Star does not outwardly seek Canaan, but rather they are situated within black culture, or in the words of the Nobel Prize winning author, Toni Morrison, they can "go straight to where the fertility [is] in this landscape [of blackness]. I stood on the border, stood on the edge, and claimed it as the mainstream and let the world come to where I was."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ "Toni Morrison Uncensored." Interview by Jana Wendt. *Toni Morrison Uncensored*. ABC. 1998.

Conclusion

I think what my parents do has had a huge influence on my lyrical content. My mother is a professor of English and my father is a professor of sociology. You combine those things and add an urban landscape and you get hip-hop.
- Talib Kweli

The legendary emcee, Nas, famously declared hip-hop to be “dead” in 2006. Given his ability and the fact that he reigned supreme over what many call hip-hop’s peak with his album, *Illmatic*, in 1994, Nas’ proclamation shook the hip-hop world to its foundation. Surely, label politics have done a great deal of harm to the genre, as music such as Black Star is not regularly seen as commercially viable. This is the forlorn position James Peterson calls attention to when he said that “this is a Drake hip-hop audience.” Though many today still wrestle with the idea that hip-hop is past its prime, or even completely dead, the music of Black Star challenges that sullen notion.

The fact that the public has elevated certain types of hip-hop to commercial success should not be the barometer on hip-hop culture. Black Star and James Baldwin are a testament to this truth. Black Star, in the footsteps of Baldwin before them, refused to allow normative white representations of their blackness be the defining factor because they refused to live beneath the veil of race. Instead they fashioned their own self perceptions, based out of the everyday reality of the ghetto lifestyle.

Hip-hop can’t be dead when Mos Def can check the pulse of his home and “feel the city breathing.” The ghetto is alive, not only as a cultural and spiritual center of black liberation but in that its inhabitants are alive and kicking. Mos tells his audience in the introduction to his song, *Fear Not of Man*, his answer to the existential fear about hip-

hop's uncertain future, assuaging hip-hop heads' worries:

We are hip-hop /
 Me, you, everybody, we are hip-hop /
 So hip-hop is goin where we goin' /
 So the next time you ask yourself where hip-hop is goin' /
 ask yourself.. where am I goin'? How am I doin'?/...⁵⁶

This portion of his introductory verse sums up Baldwin and Black Star's main idea beautifully: that in order to understand our world we have to first understand ourselves. We can't encounter race as it truly is, in its most nebulous form, until we've fully interrogated our current position. What is whiteness really, once you get beyond the language which was created to uphold its dominant status in America? The truths that Mos Def and Talib Kweli seek in their music are the same truths that Joseph discovers about the state of his world; those same truths that allow Joseph to transcend his oppression and liberate his condition on this earth.

Unwavering racial subjugation, coupled with the Mainline Black Church's abandonment of the inner city pushed blacks to formulate a new theology of liberation. Hip-hop, with its Joseph-ian narrative, provided the perfect antidote to the pitfalls of the Exodus theology of the spirituals. Slave theology reinforced black subjugation as soon as it acknowledged that freedom was outside of the state of being black in America and had to be found elsewhere. Exodus reinforced freedom as a white narrative, enabling the normative white gaze to continue to conceive of itself as being in the center of the universe. Hip-hop theology did not accept the idea that freedom was elsewhere and centered the universe around the experience of being black in America's ghetto. This

⁵⁶ Mos Def. "Fear Not of Man." *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus, 1999.

“RE:DEFinition” displaced the eye of the white normative gaze, thus toppling the monolithic construction of whiteness that had oppressed black bodies and liberating them where they stood. There was no need to look for a “balm in Gilead,” for the music was a liberating agent in their present space.

How can hip-hop be dead if, through the music, blacks can connect with a rich cultural history that liberates and empowers their blackness in the here-now? How can hip-hop be dead if Black Star and other artists continue the theological remix from the spirituals to hip-hop as we speak? The answer is simple...

Hip-hop is not dead. Through artists like Black Star hip-hop is alive and well, breathing life into us and into our cities.

Appendix

i. “Little Brother”

Written by: Black Star (Mos Def & Talib Kweli)- Produced by. J Dilla

'Now listen'

(Mos) ...doin' this song for you.

all my little brothers.. out in the street.

strugglin' to survive.. keep your eyes on the prize, you know

(Kweli)

Yeah, the revolution will not be televised

Or broadcast live on the net

My man Mos said it's personal.. namsayin?

It's gotta start from right up in here, you know

(Mos & Kweli)

You can't stop, you know (x3)

You can't stop, who we rep?

(Kweli)

We rep the ain't-gots

Ain't nobody can't start no party like us, we crush the faint hearts

From Hallsey to St. Mark's, walkin' the main blocks

Painted with blood that's still hot, so deep it stain socks

The pain spark frustration, situations lead to hatin'

Some deal with drug distribution, others walk the plantation

Some know the code a' the streets, some got a college education

Come down on the weekend, and peep the conversation

(Mos)

Yo

On the corner, units stormed out

Ghetto lookin' bombed out

Police waited to roll, for those who walk the wrong route

Shorties goin' all out, they got they swords drawn out

Ready to brawl out, getting' fought 'til they fall out

Black like Morehouse, 40 o'z is tossed out

For brothers that they mourn bout, get wrecked 'til it's dawn out

Whether they broke or flossed out, honeys pass they draws out

Lookin' for a ticket out the poor-house

A jungle out here

Lions keep they claws out, fangs and jaws out

Weak just get forced out

Names is called out, ghetto-fame is sought out

You wanna be the man that they talk bout

I walked out, I had some things on my mind to sort out

I thought bout the wild circumstance we born out

Remember myself at your age, when I was just like you
 If that was now, I don't know what I would do
 My answer's closest to me
 So what I say to you is goin' for me
 Son we both still growin' indeed
 But where you at, I was, and where you been, I left
 Utilize my experience to guide your step
 Some people get love but don't command respect
 It's somethin' that you can't buy with a check,
 Or a Roll a' your Lex, or icy links that hang from your neck
 If it's real, who need to deal with the special effects?

(Kweli)

Come here, come here, yo
 Lemme drop this on ya, look they gotchu cornered
 The corner of the block is hot, I ain't got to warn ya
 'Cause I see you every day, trapped in every way
 'Shit, I'm a thug, and that's all that I can say'
 Who are you anyway?
 Mary J.?
 I spend, many nights awake, watchin' you while you sleep
 Tryin' to figure out how to be the example, 'cause talk is cheap
 As you walk the streets, study cats on the real
 In a convo, just make your point to relax and chill
 Niggas wanna destroy each other in a cypher instead a' build
 Be a man of will, don't be standin' still
 If you- don't plan ahead, then you- plan to fail
 Dudes be in a daze when the ways reveal
 Like they funny style but I'm not laughin'
 Serious niggas makin' money while the police is passin'
 Can't wait for opportunity to knock, you gotta make it happen
 It ain't about no spectacular ways a' rappin'
 Just immaculate ways a' action.. dig?

(Mos sings)

Little Brother
 I know that times is hard
 Keep your mind on guard
 Stay clear of the danger and harm and
 You'll get along
 I sing my song
 For little brothers
 Out there in the street
 Strugglin' to make ends meet
 Gotta hold the heat
 Strugglin' so hard to compete
 Stay clear of the danger and harm and
 Stay on the job
 Try to stay strong
 Keep movin' on (x6)

ii. "Respiration"

Written by: Black Star (Mos Def & Talib Kweli), Common

Produced by: Hi-Tek

"what'd you do last night? "
 "we did umm, two whole cars
 It was me, dez, and main three right?
 And on the first car in small letters it said
 'all you see is..' and then you know
 Big, big, you know some block silver letters
 That said '..crime in the city' right? "
 "it just took up the whole car? "
 "yeah yeah, it was a whole car and shit..."

[spanish speaking woman] escuchela... la ciudad respirando
 (translation of spanish: listen to it.. the city breathing)

* woman repeats 3x *

[spanish speaking woman] escuchela..

[mos def]
 The new moon rode high in the crown of the metropolis
 Shinin', like who on top of this?
 People was tusslin', arguin' and bustlin'
 Gangstaz of Gotham hardcore hustlin'
 I'm wrestlin' with words and ideas
 My ears is picky, seekin' what will transmit
 The scribes can apply to transcript, yo,
 This ain't no time where the usual is suitable
 Tonight alive, let's describe the inscrutable
 The indisputable, we New York the narcotic
 Strength in metal and fiber optics
 Where mercenaries is paid to trade hot stock tips
 For profits, thirsty criminals take pockets
 Hard knuckles on the second hands of workin' class watches
 Skyscrapers is colossus, the cost of living
 Is preposterous, stay alive, you play or die, no options
 No batman and robin, can't tell between
 The cops and the robbers, they both partners, they all heartless
 With no conscience, back streets stay darkened
 Where unbeliever hearts stay hardened
 My eagle talons stay sharpened, like city lights stay throbbin'
 You either make a way or stay sobbin', the shiny apple
 Is bruised but sweet and if you choose to eat
 You could lose your teeth, many crews retreat
 Nightly news repeat, who got shot down and locked down
 Spotlight to savages, NASDAQ averages
 My narrative, rose to explain this existence
 Amidst the harbor lights which remain in the distance

So much on my mind that I can't recline
 Blastin' holes in the night 'til she bled sunshine
 Breathe in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine
 Breathe out, weed smoke retrace the skyline
 Heard the bass ride out like an ancient mating call
 I can't take it y'all, I can feel the city breathin'
 Chest heavin', against the flesh of the evening
 Sigh before we die like the last train leaving

[talib kweli]
 Breathin' in deep city breaths, sittin' on shitty steps
 We stoop to new lows, hell froze the night the city slept
 The beast crept through concrete jungles
 Communicatin' with one another
 And ghetto birds where waters fall
 From the hydrants to the gutters
 The beast walk the beats, but the beats we be makin'
 You on the wrong side of the track, lookin' visibly shaken
 Taken them plungers, plungin' to death that's painted by the numbers
 With crime unapplied pressure, cats is playin' god
 But havin' children by a lesser baby mother but fuck it
 We played against each other like puppets, swearin' you got pull
 When the only pull you got is the wool over your eyes
 Gettin' knowledge in jail like a blessing in disguise
 Look in the skies for god, what you see besides the smog
 Is broken dreams flying away on the wings of the obscene
 Thoughts that people put in the air
 Places where you could get murdered over a glare
 But everything is fair
 It's a paradox we call reality
 So keepin' it real will make you casualty of abnormal normality
 Killers born naturally like, Mickey and Mallory
 Not knowing the ways'll get you capped like an NBA salary
 Some cats be emceeing to illustrate what we be seeing
 Hard to be a spiritual being when shit is shakin' what you believe in
 For trees to grow in Brooklyn, seeds need to be planted
 I'm asking if y'all feel me and the crowd left me stranded
 My blood pressure boiled and rose, cause New York niggas
 Actin' spoiled at shows, to the winners the spoils go
 I take the 1, transfer to the 2, head to the gates
 New York life type trife the Roman Empire State

[mos def and crew]
 So much on my mind I just can't recline
 Blastin' holes in the night 'til she bled sunshine
 Breathe in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine
 Breathe out, weed smoke retrace the skyline
 Yo don't the bass ride out like an ancient mating call
 I can't take it y'all, I can feel the city breathin'
 Chest heavin', against the flesh of the evening

Sigh before we die like the last train leaving

[spanish speaking woman] escuchela.. respirando ? ?

[common]

Yo...on the amen, corner I stood lookin' at my former hood
 Felt the spirit in the wind, knew my friend was gone for good
 Threw dirt on the casket, the hurt, I couldn't mask it
 Mixin' down emotions, struggle I hadn't mastered
 I choreographed seven steps to heaven
 And hell, waiting to exhale and make the bread leavened
 Veteran of a cold war it's Chica-I-Go for
 What I know or, what's known
 So some days I take the bus home, just to touch home
 From the crib I spend months gone
 Sat by the window with a clutched dome listenin' to shorties cuss long
 Young girls with weak minds, but they butt strong
 Tried to call, or at least beep the lord, but didn't have a touch-tone
 It's a dog-eat-dog world, you gotta mush on
 Some of this land I must own
 Outta the city, they want us gone
 Tearin' down the 'jects creatin' plush homes
 My circumstance is between Cabrini and love Jones
 Surrounded by hate, yet I love home
 Ask my God how he thought travelin' the world sound
 Found it hard to imagine he hadn't been past downtown
 It's deep, I heard the city breathe in its sleep
 Of reality I touch, but for me it's hard to keep
 Deep, I heard my man breathe in his sleep
 Of reality I touch, but for me it's hard to keep

[mos def and crew]

So much on my mind I just can't recline
 Blastin' holes in the night 'til she bled sunshine
 Breathe in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine
 Breathe out, weed smoke retrace the skyline
 Yo how the bass ride out like an ancient mating call
 I can't take it y'all, I can feel the city breathing
 Chest heavin', against the flesh of the evening
 Kiss the ide's goodbye, I'm on the last train leaving

iii. "Just to Get By"

Written by: Talib Kweli

Produced by: Kanye West

[Talib Kweli]

Yeah.. my Lord.. yeah

We sell, crack to our own out the back of our homes
 We smell the musk at the dusk in the crack of the dawn
 We go through "Epidodes too," like "Attack of the Clones"
 Work 'til we break our back and you hear the crack of the bone
 To get by.. just to get by
 Just to get by, just to get by
 We commute to computers
 Spirits stay mute while you eagles spread rumors
 We survivalists, turned to consumers
 To get by.. just to get by
 Just to get by, just to get by
 Ask Him why some people got to live in a trailer, cuss like a sailor
 I paint a picture with the pen like Norman Mailer
 Mi Abuela raised three daughters all by herself, with no help
 I think about a struggle and I find the strength in myself
 These words, melt in my mouth
 They hot, like the jail cell in the South
 Before my nigga Core bailed me out
 To get by.. just to get by
 Just to get by, just to get by
 We do or die like Bed-Stuy through the red sky
 with the window of the red eye
 Let the lead fly, some G. Rap shit, "Livin' to Let Die"

[Chorus: Background singers]

This morning, I woke up
 Feeling brand new and I jumped up
 Feeling my highs, and my lows
 In my soul, and my goals
 Just to stop smoking', and stop drinkin'
 And I've been thinkin' - I've got my reasons
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)

[Talib and Background Singers]

(ba ba ba, ba da bada, ba da bada, ba da bada, ba da badahh
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)
 Just to get (by by by by by by)
 (ba ba ba, ba da bada, ba da bada, ba da bada, ba da badahh
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)
 Just to get (by by by by by by)

[Verse 2: Talib]

We keeping it gangster say "fo shizzle", "fo sheezy" and "stayin' crunk"
 Its easy to pull a breezy, smoke trees, and we stay drunk
 Yo, our activism attackin' the system, the blacks and latins in prison
 Numbers of prison they victim black in the vision
 Shit and all they got is rappin to listen to
 I let them know we missin' you, the love is unconditional
 Even when the condition is critical, when the livin' is miserable
 Your position is pivotal, I ain't bullshittin' you
 Now, why would I lie? Just to get by?
 Just to get by, we get fly
 The TV got us reachin' for stars
 Not the ones between Venus and Mars, the ones that be readin' for parts
 Some people get breast enhancements and penis enlargers
 Saturday sinners Sunday morning at the feet of the Father
 They need somethin' to rely on, we get high on all types of drug
 When, all you really need is love
 To get by.. just to get by
 Just to get by, just to get by
 Our parents sing like John Lennon, "Imagine all the people watch"
 We rock like Paul McCartney from now until the last Beatle drop

[Chorus: Background singers]

This morning, I woke up
 Feeling brand new and I jumped up
 Feeling my highs, and my lows
 In my soul, and my goals
 Just to stop smoking, and stop drinking
 And I've been thinking - I've got my reasons
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)
 Just to get (by), just to get (by)

[Talib with Background Singers]

Yoyoyo, yo
 Some people cry, and some people try
 Just to get by, for a piece of the pie
 You love to eat and get high
 We deceive when we lie, and we keepin' it fly

Yoyoyo, yo
 When, the people decide, to keep a disguise
 Can't see they eyes, see the evil inside
 But there's people you find
 Strong or feeble in mind, I stay readin' the signs

iv. “K.O.S. (Determination)”

Written by: Black Star (Mos Def & Talib Kweli)

Produced by: Hi-Tek

[Talib Kweli]

So many emcees focusin' on black people extermination
We keep it balanced with that knowledge of self determination
It's hot, we be blowin' up spots with conversations
C'mon let's smooth it out like Soul Sensation

We in the house like Japanese in Japan, or Koreans in Korea
Head to Philly and free Mumia with the Kujichagulia TRUE
Singin' is swingin' and writin' is fightin', but what
they writin' got us clashin' like titans it's not excitin'
No question, bein' a black man is demandin'
The fire's in my eyes and the flames need fannin'
With that what? (Knowledge Of Self) Determination

[Vinia Mojica]

Things I say and do, may not come quite through
My words may not convey just what I'm feelin'

[Talib Kweli]

Yes yes come on, yes yes
Knowledge Of Self is like life after death
With that you never worry about your last breath
Death comes, that's how I'm livin', it's the next days
The flesh goes underground, the book of life, flip the page
Yo they askin' me how old, we livin' the same age
I feel the rage of a million niggas locked inside a cage
At exactly which point do you start to realize
That life without knowledge is, death in disguise?
That's why, Knowledge Of Self is like life after death
Apply it, to your life, let destiny manifest
Different day, same confusion, we're gonna take this
hip-hop shit and keep it movin, shed a little light
Now y'all bloomin' like a flower with the power of the evident
Voices and drums original instruments
In the flesh presently presentin' my representation
With that what? (Knowledge Of Self) Determination

[Vinia Mojica]

Things I say and do, may not come quite through
My words may not convey just what I'm feelin'

[Talib Kweli]

The most important time in history is, NOW, the present
So count your blessings cause time can't define the essence
But you stressin' over time and you follow the Roman calendar
These people enter Cona like Gattaca, you can bet

they tryin' to lock you down like Attica, the African diaspora
 represents strength in numbers, a giant can't slumber forever
 I know you gotta get that cheddar whatever
 Aiyyo I heard you twice the first time money, get it together
 You must be History, you repeatin' yourself out of the pages
 You keepin' yourself depleatin' your spiritual wealth
 That quick cash'll get your ass quick fast in houses of detention
 Inner-city concentration camps where no one pays attention
 or mentions the ascension of death, 'til nothing's left
 The young, gifted and Black are sprung addicted to crack
 All my people where y'all at cause, y'all ain't here
 And your hero's using your mind as a canvas to paint fear
 With, broad brush strokes and tales of incarceration
 You get out of jail with that Knowledge of Self determination
 Stand in ovation, cause you put the Hue in Human
 Cause and effect, effect everything you do
 and that's why I got love in the face of hate
 Hands steady so the lines in the mental illustration is straight
 The thought you had don't even contemplate
 Infinite like figure eight there's no escape
 From that what? (Knowledge Of Self) Determination

[Vinia Mojica]

Things I say and do, may not come quite through
 My words may not convey just what I'm feelin'
 What I'm feelin', what I'm feelin', ooooh, what I'm feelin'...

iv. Keep Me From Sinking Down
(Author Unknown)

O Lord, O my Lord
O my Lord, keep me from sinkin' down

I shall tell you what I mean to do
Keep me from sinkin' down
I mean to get to heaven too
Keep me from sinkin' down

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down
Keep me from sinkin' down
Sometimes I'm almost on the ground
Keep me from sinkin' down

I bless the Lord I'm going to die
Keep me from sinkin' down
I'm going to Judgment by and by
Keep me from sinkin' down

vi. Go Down Moses

(Author Unknown)

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let My people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let My people go!

(Refrain):
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let My people go!

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let My people go!
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let My people go!

Oh, let us all from bondage flee,
Let My people go!
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let My people go!

You need not always weep and mourn,
Let My people go!
And wear these slav'ry chains forlorn,
Let My people go!

Your foes shall not before you stand,
Let My people go!
And you'll possess fair Canaan's land,
Let My people go!

vii. The Gospel Train
(Author Unknown)

The Gospel train's comin'
I hear it just at hand
I hear the car wheel rumblin'
And rollin' thro' the land

Get on board little children
Get on board little children
Get on board little children
There's room for many more

I hear the train a-comin'
She's comin' round the curve
She's loosened all her steam and brakes
And strainin' ev'ry nerve

The fare is cheap and all can go
The rich and poor are there
No second class aboard this train
No difference in the fare

viii. Sweet Canaan's Happy Land
(Author Unknown)

Oh, my brother, did you come for help to me?
Pray and give me your right hand
Oh, my sister, did you come for help to me?
Pray and give me your right hand

Oh, the land I am bound for
Sweet Canaan's happy land
I am bound for Sweet Canaan's happy land
I am bound for Sweet Canaan's happy land
Pray give me your right hand

ix. Nobody Knows De Trouble I've Seen
(Author Unknown)

Nobody knows de trouble I've seen
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows de trouble I've seen
Glory Hallelujah!

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down
Oh, yes, Lord
Sometimes I'm almost to de groun'
Oh, yes, Lord

Although you see me goin' 'long so
Oh, yes, Lord
I have my trials here below
Oh, yes, Lord

If you get there before I do
Oh, yes, Lord
Tell all-a my friends I'm coming too
Oh, yes, Lord

x. "Fear Not of Man"

Written by: Mos Def

Produced by: Mos Def

Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem

If you can hear me ladies and gentlemen
then I'm very happy that you came here..

Ooh-ooooooooooooohhhh, ooh-ooooooooooooohhh-WHEEEEEEE!!!

That was for Brooklyn..

Ha ha, we get it everytime

You got me on? Ohh

Shout out to all of my crew, East-West, North-South

All the continent, Europe, all abroad international

Bring it in, bring it in, bring it in, bring it in

It's a lot of things goin' on y'all

21st century is comin

20th century almost done

A lot of things have changed

A lot of things have not, mainly us

We gon' get it together right? I believe that

Listen.. people be askin' me all the time,

"Yo Mos, what's getting' ready to happen with Hip-Hop?"

(Where do you think Hip-Hop is goin?)

I tell 'em, "You know what's gonna happen with Hip-Hop?

Whatever's happening with us"

If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out

If we doin' alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doin' alright

People talk about Hip-Hop like it's some giant livin' in the hillside

Comin' down to visit the townspeople

We (are) Hip-Hop

Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop

So Hip-Hop is goin' where we goin'

So the next time you ask yourself where Hip-Hop is goin'

ask yourself.. where am I goin'? How am I doin'?

'Til you get a clear idea

So.. if Hip-Hop is about the people

and the.. Hip-Hop won't get better until the people get better

then how do people get better? (HMMMMM...)

Well, from my understanding people get better

when they start to understand that, they are valuable

And they not valuable because they got a whole lot of money

or cause somebody, think they sexy

but they valuable 'cause they been created by God

And God, makes you valuable

And whether or not you, recognize that value is one thing

You got a lot of societies and governments

Tryin' to be God, wishin' that they were God
 They wanna create satellites and cameras everywhere
 and make you think they got the all-seein' eye
 Eh.. I guess The Last Poets wasn't, too far off
 when they said that certain people got a God Complex
 I believe it's true
 I don't get phased out by none of that, none of that
 helicopters, the TV screens, the newscasters, the..
 satellite dishes.. they just, wishin'
 They can't really never do that
 When they tell me to fear they law
 When they tell me to try to
 have some fear in my heart behind the things that they do
 This is what I think in my mind
 And this is what I say to them
 And this is what I'm sayin' to you check it

All over the world hearts pound with the rhythm
 Fear not of men because men must die
 Mind over matter and soul before flesh
 Angels for the pain keep a record in time
 which is passin' and runnin' like a caravan freighter
 The world is overrun with the wealthy and the wicked
 But God is sufficient in disposin' of affairs
 Gunmen and stockholders try to merit my fear
 But God is sufficient over plans they prepared
 Mos Def in the flesh, where you at, right here
 on this place called Earth, holdin' down my square
 Bout to do it for y'all, and y'all at the fair
 So just bounce, come on bounce
 B-b-bounce b-bounce b-bounce-bounce
 And just..
 .. just step two three
 Just step two three and
 step two..
 two three and..
 One two three and four
 One two three and four
 Once again
 All over the world hearts pound with the rhythm
 Fear not of men because men must die
 Mind over matter and soul before flesh
 Angels for the pain keep a record in time
 which is passin' and runnin' like a caravan freighter
 The world is overrun with the wealthy and the wicked
 But God is sufficient in disposin' of affairs
 Gunmen and stockholders try to merit your fear
 But God is sufficient over plans they prepared
 Mos Def in the flesh, where you at, right here
 on this place called Earth, holdin' down my square
 Bout to represent in your whole atmosphere

Bout to represent in your whole atmosphere
to your atmosphere, to your atmosphere
Oh-ooooooooohhhhhhhhhh!
That was for you - and Brooklyn too!

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